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ABSTRACT

This report presents an analysis of parents' perceptions and judgments of the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program in Australia. Through the correspondence program, resources and guides were offered to parents living in remote rural areas of Queensland to help them provide home learning experiences for their preschool-age children. A sample of 34 families who used the program was selected for this study. Parents' opinions were obtained through interviews in their homes during a 1-2 day visit. The interview covered such topics as (1) the teacher/parent relationship; (2) parents' presentation of the program to their child; (3) program materials, including suitability of content and clarity of instructions; (4) specific feedback mechanisms used; (5) parents' social contacts and their interest in meeting with other families enrolled in the program; (6) children's range of social experiences; and (7) children's reactions to the program booklets, tapes, and activities. Finally, parents were asked to assess and summarize the effect which their involvement in the program had had on the child and on their relationship with the child or any other children in the family. (JMB)

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EVALUATION SERIES EVALUATION SERIES EVALUATION SERIES

No. 4 in a series on the evaluation
of the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRE-SCHOOL CORRESPONDENCE PROGRAM

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PS 008667

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INTRODUCTION

Providing educational facilities in remote and sparsely populated rural areas has been a problem for the State of Queensland. With the introduction of a policy to provide free, non-compulsory pre-school education the establishment of the Pre-School Correspondence Program (P.S.C.P.) was a substantial attempt to meet the needs of pre-school children in these country areas. Details of the eligibility of students and enrolment figures are provided by Ashby, McGaw and Grant (1975).

The program was offered for the first time in 1974 with parents receiving a resource/guide book and an equipment kit for suggested activities and a regular sequence of program segments consisting of discussion topics, booklets to read to the child, and pre-recorded tapes with songs and stories. A description of the program is provided in Ashby, McGaw and Perry (1975).

The Pre-School Correspondence Program aims to assist each child to develop his full potential by providing a range of learning activities and experiences of interest to children. In such a program an essential role is played by the parent, usually the mother, as 'teacher' of her pre-school child. The parent's view of the program and her interactions, by letter and tape, with the teacher are likely to be very important factors in the successful implementation of the program. A detailed analysis of the interactions between the teacher and the parent and child is given in McGaw, Ashby and Perry (1975), and an analysis of parent's perceptions and judgements of the program are presented in this report. The views of a sample of the parents were obtained during extended interviews conducted in their homes during a 1–2 day visit.

PARENT INTERVIEW

The time spent with each family varied considerably depending on the availability of accommodation and travel services. Less than one full day was spent where there was no accommodation with or near a family, while up to three days were necessary in some areas where train and air services operated only twice weekly.

Because of the length of the interview schedule, it was usually conducted in two sessions each of approximately one and a half hours' duration. These interviews were conducted by the projects' two full-time research staff as well as two pre-school advisory teachers who assisted for the period of the visits. These two pre-school advisers were briefed in detail during a three day training session, on techniques of interviewing, the purposes of the questions and the detail required in recording responses. Emphasis was also placed on the need for the interviewers to maintain a sympathetic atmosphere in which the parents would feel free to reveal their real opinions and attitudes.

The interview situation varied enormously because of differences in family routines and the degree of distraction experienced during the interview session. It was not uncommon for the interview to be conducted in the evening when children were asleep to reduce parents' distraction. In some cases, parents specifically requested this to enable them both to be present for the interview.

The general framework of the interview and the range of issues raised is indicated in Table 1 which provides a summary of the topics covered. One of the issues covered in the interview was the teacher's attempts to develop the relationship between teacher and parent. Other sections, dealing more with program implementation, included questions about the way in which parents presented the program, their opinion of

program materials, the suitability of content and the clarity of instructions. Since emphasis in the Pre-School Correspondence Program was placed on the necessity for parents to give teachers feedback to facilitate the teachers' monitoring of the children's reaction to the program, the parents were asked to comment on the specific feedback mechanisms, namely the general Background Information Sheet, completed on enrolment, and the regular Teacher Information Sheets, to be completed after each segment of the program had been used. The purpose and use of these information sheets are described in Ashby, McGaw and Perry (1975).

Table 1: Summary of Topics in Parent Interview

Parent–Teacher Relationship

1. Program in relation to home routine
2. Opinion of program book presentation
3. Extent of correspondence
4. Appropriateness of reply
5. Opinion of teacher's understanding of life situation
6. Preference for tape or letter etc.
7. Mothers view of own relationship with teacher
8. Importance of teacher visiting child
9. Preferred time for visit
10. Qualifications desired of visitor

Program Presentation

1. Opinion on size and frequency of arrival of segments
2. Clarity of difficulties in following Parents' Resource Book
3. Clarity of/difficulties in following Segment Books
4. Clarity of/difficulties in following Topic Booklets
5. Clarity of/difficulties in following Contact
6. Most difficult topic to explain
7. Clarity of instructions
8. Suitability of topics for child.
9. Topics desired added, deleted, changed
10. Ease, difficulty of activities suggested
11. Opinion of structure, presentation, format
12. Impression of Contact Booklet
13. Usefulness of Resource Book
14. Value of Teacher Information Sheets
15. Evidence of use of Information given

Social Contact of Parents

1. Interest in meeting with other parents
2. Distance parent could travel to meet
3. Frequency of attendance possible at meetings

Child–Teacher Relationship

1. Child's knowledge of teacher's name
2. Child's eagerness to send paintings; pastings
3. Teacher's reaction to child's art work
4. Time lag between work sent in and comment received
5. Evidence of program modification for individual child's needs

Child's Experience

1. Attendance at Pre-School/Play Group
2. Frequency of contact with friends/children own age
3. Experience in environments beyond home

Child in the Program

1. Knowledge of topics in booklets
2. Ranked interest in program facets
3. Interest in booklets
4. Reaction to tapes – number of times played
   – amount played
   – reaction to suggestions
5. Reaction to library books
6. Other items would like to borrow
7. Reaction to and use of equipment kit
8. Frequency of play activities
9. Presence of others during program activities
10. Any change in ability to listen, concentrate express self

Parent–Child Interaction

1. Effects on parent/child/other
2. Parents' view of own role in program
3. Summary opinion of program for child

Parents were asked about their social contacts and their interest in meeting with other families enrolled in the Pre-School Correspondence Program. Information was also sought on the range of their children's social experiences and the frequency of their contact with other children. A major section dealt with the children's reaction to the program booklets, tapes and activities.

Parents were finally asked to assess and summarize the effect, if any, which their involvement in the program, had had on the child, and the mother's relationship with both the pre-school child and any other children in the family.

SAMPLE

Selection of Sample

A random selection procedure, in which all families had an equal chance of being selected, was used to select 40 of the families enrolled in the program. This represented about 10 per cent of the enrolment. Of the 40 families selected, there were three who did not desire to participate, two who could not accommodate a visitor and one additional one which had to be deleted because of the interviewer's inability to reach the home by car during wet weather. Consequently, all findings are based on a sample of 34 families.

Representativeness of Sample

The use of a completely random process for the selection of the sample was designed to ensure that the families selected would be representative of the total enrolment in the Pre-School Correspondence Program. The age distributions of the 34 children in the final sample and of the other 410 children enrolled in the program are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Age Distributions of Children

Age Range	Sample		Non-Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under 4 years	0	0.0	3	0.7
4 years	5	14.7	25	6.1
4 years to 4 years 3 months	5	14.7	108	26.3
4 years 3 months to 4 years 6 months	8	23.5	93	22.7
4 years 6 months to 4 years 9 months	9	26.5	92	22.4
4 years 9 months to 5 years	4	11.8	65	15.9
5 years to 5 years 3 months	2	5.9	20	4.9
5 years 3 months to 5 years 6 months	0	0.0	3	0.7
5 years 6 months to 5 years 9 months	0	0.0	0	0.0
5 years 9 months to 6 years	1	2.9	1	0.3
Totals	34	100.0	410	100.0

χ^2 (8) = 11.3, $p > .05$

This table provides the numbers and percentages of sample and non-sample children at three monthly age intervals, the ages being taken at 28 February 1975. There was no significant difference between the distributions as revealed by the chi-square shown under the Table, so the sample was respresentative of the total enrolment in terms of age. In Queensland, entry to Grade 1 is allowed in a calandar year if the child is five by the last day in February, but is mandatory if the child is six at that date. Children may attend pre-school in the year before that in which they would be eligible to enter school. It can be seen, therefore, that three of the children in the non-sample group were actually under age for enrolment in pre-school.

The geographical distributions of the sample children and the rest of the enrolment are shown in Table 3, which gives the distribution in terms of statistical divisions within Queensland. The chi-square was non-significant at the .05 level indicating again the representativeness of the sample, the sample being as dispersed through Queensland as the total enrolment. The distribution of the statistical divisions throughout Queensland is shown in Figure 1.

Table 3: Geographical Distribution of Families

Statistical Division of Residence	Sample		Non-Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
01 Brisbane	0	0.0	1	0.2
02 Moreton	0	0.0	7	1.7
03 Maryborough	2	5.9	12	2.9
04 Downs	3	8.8	34	8.1
05 Roma	2	5.9	52	12.4
06 South Western	4	11.8	24	5.7
07 Rockhampton	5	14.8	69	16.5
08 Central Western	9	26.5	60	14.3
09 Far Western	1	2.9	19	4.5
10 Mackay	1	2.9	31	7.4
11 Townsville	3	8.8	28	6.7
12 Cairns	1	2.9	40	9.6
13 Peninsular	0	0.0	4	1.0
14 North Western	3	8.8	32	7.6
15 Other	0	0.0	6	1.4
Totals	34	100.0	419	100.0

χ^2 (14) = 11.3, p > .05

The distances from the children's homes to the nearest primary school are shown in Table 4. A comparison of these revealed that the families visited actually lived significantly further away from primary schools than the rest of families enrolled. The sample children were, therefore, more remote from school facilities than the total enrolment. Any children who lived more than 3.2 km from a primary school would be eligible for enrolment in the Primary Correspondence School in 1976, though many in this category would travel daily to the school. Although those children enrolled, who

Fig. 1: Location of Statistical Divisions within Queensland

lived under that limit, were close to small primary schools they were eligible for enrolment in the Pre-School Correspondence Program because their small local primary schools offered no pre-school program. In 1974, the first year of the Pre-School Correspondence Program, only those who would have been eligible for correspondence primary education were eligible for the pre-school correspondence program. The eligibility criteria were broadened in 1975.

Table 4: Distance from Home to Nearest Primary School

Distance to Primary School	Sample		Non-Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under 3.2 km	6	18.2	84	21.5
3.2 to 10 km	3	9.1	51	13.1
11 to 20 km	3	9.1	42	10.8
21 to 40 km	6	18.2	77	19.7
41 to 60 km	4	12.1	47	12.1
61 to 80 km	6	18.2	27	6.9
81 to 100 km	1	3.0	25	6.4
Over 100 km	4	12.1	37	9.5
Totals	33	100.0	390	100.0

χ^2 (7) = 137.9, p < .01

In a comparison of services and equipment available to both sample and non-sample families there were no significant differences between the two groups in the possession of cassette player/recorders, television and 240 volt power or the reception of Australian Broadcasting Commission radio and television transmission. The numbers of families to which these facilities were available are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Availability of Services and Equipment

Services and Equipment	Sample				Non-Sample			
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Cassette Player/Recorder	25	75.8	8	24.2	222	61.3	140	38.7
240 volt power	23	69.7	10	30.3	265	73.2	97	26.8
T.V. Broadcasts	23	69.7	10	30.3	272	75.1	90	24.9
Own T.V.	18	54.5	15	45.5	220	60.8	142	39.2
A.B.C.	32	97.0	1	3.0	343	95.0	18	5.0

13

For χ^2 test for each p > .05

All parents were asked, in completing the Background Information Sheet, to list the number and types of disadvantages they felt were associated with living where they did, in the more remote areas of the State. There were no significant differences between the sample and non-sample families in the numbers of problems raised or the types of comment made. Among the families in the sample, 44 per cent claimed no disadvantages for the area in which they lived while, for the non-sample, the figure was 41 per cent. The particular descriptions of the disadvantages raised by the parents have been categorized into the entries in Table 6 in which are also shown the numbers of parents raising each of the issues as the first mentioned disadvantage.

Table 6: Declared Disadvantages of Place of Residence

First Disadvantage	Sample		Non-Sample	
	No.	%	No.	%
isolation from children of own age	13	68.4	90	47.9
lack of organised pre-school facilities	1	5.3	24	12.8
unavailability of experiences at coast and in cities	1	5.3	13	6.9
shyness due to lack of social contact	0	0.0	11	5.9
distance to be travelled to school	0	0.0	8	4.3
effects of boarding at school on family life	0	0.0	5	2.7
superiority of schools in cities	0	0.0	5	2.7
unavailability of classes for cultural and sporting activities	0	0.0	5	2.7
unavailability of group activities (e.g. Scouts)	0	0.0	5	2.7
lack of facilities (e.g. electricity, radio, T.V.)	3	15.8	1	0.5
distance from friends	1	5.3	4	2.1
difficulty in getting specialist help for handicapped child	0	0.0	3	1.6
lack of competitiveness among children in small schools	0	0.0	2	1.1
not specified	0	0.0	2	1.1
magnitude of other demands on mothers' time	0	0.0	1	0.5
unavailability of some material suggested in program	0	0.0	1	0.5
slower development rates of country children	0	0.0	1	0.5
sub-standard housing	0	0.0	1	0.5
distance to medical care	0	0.0	1	0.5
narrowness of outlook of people in area	0	0.0	1	0.5
climate (heat)	0	0.0	1	0.5
inadequate activities lead to fighting	0	0.0	1	0.5
unavailability of Sunday School	0	0.0	1	0.5
too early to comment	0	0.0	1	0.5
Total	19	100.0	188	100.0

χ^2 (23) = 29.5 p > .05

The frequency with which mail was received by families is shown in Table 7. There were no significant differences between the distribution of sample and non-sample mail services, so the operation of the correspondence program for the sample, through its dependence on mail services, should have been representative of that for the total enrolment.

Table 7: Frequency of Mail Service

Frequency of Mail	Sample		Non-Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Daily	2	6.2	61	16.9
Twice per week	22	68.8	185	51.3
Weekly	8	25.0	108	29.9
Fortnightly	0	0.0	3	0.8
Monthly	0	0.0	1	0.3
Less than monthly	0	0.0	3	0.8
Totals	32	100.0	361	100.0

χ^2 (5) = 4.6, p = > .05

There was no significant difference between sample and non-sample families with respect to the delay experienced with mail services in the wet season. For some these delays were substantial, with considerable implications for a correspondence program. The range in delays experiences, shown in Table 8, extended to more than a month for over 10 per cent of the families.

Table 8: Length of Delay in Mail Service during Wet Season

Length of Delay	Sample		Non-Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
None	10	30.3	137	37.9
One Week	5	15.2	92	25.5
Two Weeks	4	12.1	45	12.5
Three Weeks	7	21.2	26	7.2
Four Weeks	2	6.0	18	5.0
More than Four Weeks	5	15.2	43	11.9
Totals	33	100.0	361	100.0

χ^2 (5) = 9.2, p > .05

Parents' occupations were classified according to the coding categories of the Index of Occupations (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1971). One additional classification, that of 866: Housewife, was included for the purpose of this project. All occupations which were represented by at least four persons were individually listed in Tables 9, 10 and 11. Occupations represented by fewer than four persons were combined in the "other" category. The range of fathers' occupations, as shown in Table 9, was equally represented in both sample and non-sample families.

Table 9: Distribution of Fathers' Occupations

Fathers' Occupations		Sample		Non-Sample	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
43	Teacher	1	2.9	5	1.4
119	Manager	1	2.9	6	1.7
301	Sugarcane grower	0	0.0	18	4.9
308	Grazier	18	52.9	179	49.6
314	Agricultural Farmer/Grazier	6	17.7	44	12.2
324	Farm Labourer/Station hand	2	5.9	36	9.9
660	Electrician	0	0.0	6	1.7
772	Construction Worker	2	5.9	4	1.2
785	Labourer	0	0.0	5	1.4
	Other	2	11.8	58	16.0
	Totals	34	100.0	361	100.0

χ^2 (9) = 12.1, $p > .05$

In the ranges of mothers' occupations before marriage, shown in Table 10, there were significant differences between the mothers in the sample families and those in the rest of the families. Mothers in the sample were more likely to have had a post-secondary education with a greater percentage having been qualified nurses than for the non-sample in the Pre-School Correspondence Program.

In their present occupations, there were no significant differences with similar percentages of mothers from sample and non-sample groups working in the variety of occupations but with a clear majority in both groups working full-time on home duties. The distribution is shown in Table 11.

In response to a general question in the Background Information Sheet one-quarter of parents mentioned problems which they felt affected their children. Of those mentioned 54 per cent indicated the child's speech as the source of the problem. The sample was representative of the whole group in the number and type of problems specified by parents. There was no significant difference between the numbers of parents in both sample and non-sample groups who mentioned each problem. Problems of an emotional and behavioural type were combined in the "other" category in Table 12, in which these responses are summarized.

Table 10: Distribution of Mothers' Occupations Before Marriage

	Mother's Occupation before Marriage	Sample		Non-Sample	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
30	Nursing sister	9	29.0	62	18.1
32	Dentists nurse	1	3.2	10	2.9
42	Teacher – tertiary	1	3.2	4	1.2
43	Teacher	4	12.9	41	12.0
155	Shorthand typist	3	9.7	49	14.3
163	Clerical/Secretarial Duties	3	9.7	25	7.3
211	Shop Assistant	3	9.7	25	7.3
324	Farm Worker/Station Hand	2	6.5	28	8.2
545	Telephonist	11	3.2	11	3.2
808	Hotel Employee	0	0.0	12	3.5
811	Child Care/Travel Hostess	1	3.2	6	1.8
815	Waitress	0	0.0	8	2.3
825	Hairdresser	0	0.0	5	1.5
866	Home Duties	0	0.0	11	3.2
	Other	3	9.7	45	13.2
	Totals	31	100.0	342	100.0

χ^2 (14) = 4.37, p < .005

Table 11: Distribution of Mothers' Occupations

	Mother's Occupation	Sample		Non-Sample	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
30	Nursing Sister	1	2.9	2	0.5
42	Teacher–Tertiary	0	0.0	2	0.5
43	Teacher	1	2.9	7	1.9
150	Clerk	0	0.0	2	0.5
163	Clerical/Secretarial duties	0	0.0	6	1.6
308	Grazier	1	2.9	11	3.0
555	Post Mistress	1	2.9	5	1.4
807	Cook	2	5.9	4	1.1
808	Hotel Employee	0	0.0	2	0.5
860	Loading wren	0	0.0	2	0.5
806	Housewife/Mother	25	73.6	273	75.0
	Other	3	8.9	13	3.5
	Totals	34	100.0	364	100.0

χ^2 (11) = 10.0, p > .05

Table 12: Numbers of Parents Reporting Special Problems for Child

Special Problems	Sample		Non-Sample	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
None	26	81.3	256	73.5
Sight	1	3.1	9	2.6
Hearing	0	0.0	3	0.9
Speech	4	12.5	46	13.2
Physical Disability	0	0.0	9	2.6
More than one	1	3.1	2	0.6
Other	0	0.0	23	6.6
Totals	32	100.0	348	100.0

χ^2 (6) = 5.9, $p > .05$

On the basis of the preceding comparisons it can be seen that the 10 per cent sample selected provided a good match with the remaining 90 per cent of the families in the Pre-School Correspondence Program. The interviews with the sample could be taken to have represented the views of all families enrolled in the Pre-School Correspondence Program in 1975.

PARENTS' VIEWS OF PROGRAM

Parent-Teacher Relationship

The parent-teacher relationship is an integral part of a correspondence program and, as such, warrants analysis from the parent's viewpoint as well as a more formal investigation of the interactions between parties, particularly teachers and parents. The latter type of analysis is presented in McGaw, Ashby and Perry (1975).

In the personal interview with parents several questions were designed to establish the parents' view of the relationship they had with the pre-school correspondence teacher. Parents were asked about their willingness to contact teachers on a number of problems. Their responses are shown in Table 13. The parents seemed quite willing to write to teachers about problems related to the Pre-School Correspondence Program, for example 91.2 per cent indicated that they would write if they were behind schedule with the program. Where the problem was more personal, however, more parents expressed a reluctance to seek help from the teacher. For problems involving the child's behaviour only 73.5 per cent declared a willingness to reveal them to the teacher. This is still a substantial proportion of the parents, of course, but it should be noted that it refers only to declared willingness. The actual frequencies of contacts of this type are discussed in McGaw, Ashby and Perry (1975).

The parents were asked to indicate specific issues on which they had actually written to the pre-school correspondence staff and to provide some personal judgement of the replies they received. In fact, very few parents indicated that they had written about any issues of concern. Problems were written about on 25 occasions. Of the 34 families in the

Table 13: Willingness of Parents to Contact Teachers About Specific Problems

Problem	Parent Willingness			
	Yes		No	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
behind schedule with program	31	91.2	3	8.8
child's ability with program	29	85.3	5	14.7
child's general development	28	82.4	6	17.6
child's behaviour	25	73.5	9	26.5

sample, 15 had not written about problems at all. The issues about which they wrote and their judgements of the replies are given in Table 14.

Table 14: Frequency with which Parents Wrote about Issues and Helpfulness of Teachers' Responses

Topic of Concern in Correspondence	Never Written		Written but no reply		Written & Adequacy of Reply					
					Not Helpful		Quite Helpful		Very Helpful	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Understanding of parents book	34	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Use of materials in kit	33	97.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.9	0	0.0
Program requirements	29	85.3	1	2.9	0	0.0	3	8.0	1	2.9
Need for more program content	30	88.4	1	2.9	1	2.9	1	2.9	1	2.9
Being behind schedule with program	29	85.3	0	0.0	1	2.9	3	8.9	1	2.9
Child's negative response to program	32	94.2	1	2.9	0	0.0	1	2.9	0	0.0
Child's behaviour problems	33	97.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.9	0	0.0
Child's disability or slow development	27	79.3	3	8.9	2	5.9	2	5.9	0	0.0
Choice of activities for child	34	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Of the 25 issues about which parents reported letters had been written, 6 had produced no reply and 4 yielded replies which the parents judged to be unhelpful. Replies judged to be quite helpful had been received for 12 of the letters and replies judged very helpful for 3 of them. The lack of reply may have been due in part to replies not having been received at the time of the visit rather than failure to reply, but the delays in response were of concern to the parents. Irregularity and infrequency of mail services contributed to these problems but there were also delays associated with the procedures at the Pre-School Correspondence Unit, by which replies were checked and authorized by senior staff before despatch.

Teachers were more often judged by the parents as having dealt satisfactorily with enquiries about program requirements than with enquiries of a more serious nature, such as requests for advice about a child's disability. While the more routine administrative matters were apparently dealt with efficiently, those enquiries seeking more professional advice from the teaching staff were less well handled in the views of the parents. The

problems involved were personal and complex, of course, and it would be very difficult to undertake by correspondence some of the diagnoses and prescriptions required. The fact that there was some parent dissatisfaction with the way in which developmental and learning problems were dealt with suggests the need for support resources for the teachers to call upon to develop advice to the parents. The teachers could, in such cases, become the mediator unless the problems were sufficiently severe to warrant direct referral.

People in isolated rural areas frequently complain that urban dwellers do not understand their situation. The parents were asked how well they felt the pre-school teachers understood and, in addition, to indicate the grounds on which they arrived at their judgements. Their responses are summarized in Table 15.

Table 15: Parents' Judgements of Teacher's Understanding of Parent's Life Style by Evidence for Judgements

Evidence for Judgement	Teachers Understanding in Parent's Judgement			
	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good
teacher comments	0	1	10	3
administrative judgements	0	1	7	0
lack of local knowledge	1	2	0	0
type of activities suggested	2	0	1	0
lack of teacher reply	2	0	0	0
Total	5	4	18	3

Of the 34 parents, 21 felt that teachers understood their life situation well. This judgement was based mainly on the type of comments made by teachers and the administrative adjustments which had been made to suit the parents. The fact that some illustrations and stories in the correspondence materials reflected the life style of people in the outback had made some parents feel that the teachers understood their situation. The most important determinant was the evidence given by particular teachers in their correspondence of empathy with parents. Of the parents who answered nine felt the teacher did not understand. Three of these parents based the views of what they took to be evidence of the teacher's lack of any local knowledge. In the case of two parents, their judgement of the teacher's lack of awareness of their situation was revealed in activities they suggested for the children. For example, it was suggested that children put their heads out the window of a moving car to feel the breeze – an action which one parent pointed to as actually being dangerous.

Other attributes of teachers' efforts to build up a good relationship between parent and teacher were more important, however, than their prior understanding of the family's life style. The responses shown in Table 16 suggest that the adequacy of the teachers' knowledge of the family is a product, not a determinant, of the quality of the relationship. Where communication was frequent and personal the parents were more confident that the teachers understood.

Apart from the formal contacts which can be established through correspondence and exchange of tapes, the one clear possibility for deepening the contact between teacher and family would be for the teachers to visit the families. During the interview the parents were asked for their reaction to the possibility of teacher making personal visits.

Table 16: Parents' Judgements of Teacher's Understanding of Parent's Life Style by Relationship with Teacher

Description of Parent-Teacher Relationship	Teacher's Understanding in Parent's Judgement				Total
	Very poor	Poor	Good	Very good	
Insufficient contact – teacher's fault	3	2	1	0	6
Insufficient contact – parent's fault	1	1	2	0	4
Insufficient contact – desire more but no blame ascribed	0	2	1	1	4
Contact too impersonal	1	0	2	0	3
Helpful, but not close	1	1	4	2	8
Good personal relationship	0	0	8	0	8
Total	6	6	18	3	33

χ^2 (15) = 22.0, $p > .10$

Their reactions are summarized in Table 17, which reveals a significant relationship between the parents' judgements of the teachers knowledge of their life style and the value that they would attach to a visit from the teacher. The pattern was not a clear one but there was a tendency for those who felt that the teachers understood them least well to be more strongly in favour of visits. Overall, the prospect of teacher visits was well received, with only two out of 33 parents declaring it to be unnecessary. There were 16 who, while acknowledging the value of such visits, were unconvinced of their necessity, but 12 of these believed the teacher already had a good knowledge of their life style. Since costs would obviously be an important consideration in implementing any general scheme for home visits, a useful approach might be a flexible one in which the families visited are those for whom it is anticipated there would be the greatest benefit.

If home visits by teachers were to be implemented, there was some variability among parents in the timing they would prefer for the visits, as shown in Table 18. As the main purpose of the visit would be for parents to learn how better to fulfill their role of the child's teacher, 87.5 per cent of parents felt the visit should take place in the first half of the year. This would enable the parents to have become familiar with the program content and assess their child's reaction to the program. It would also mean that parents would still have the major part of the year ahead of them during which to implement what they had learnt from the teacher's visit. Only one parent proposed that the visit should occur before the program began.

The parents were also asked to indicate what tasks they would like the visitor to undertake, in addition to providing advice on the Pre-School Correspondence Program. As shown in Table 19, 18 parents, 56.2 per cent, would want the visitor to be able to advise on the primary school work of their older school children. Ten families, who were keen to meet with other parents and children enrolled in the Pre-School

Table 17: Parents' Judgements of Teacher's Understanding of Parents' Life Style by Parents' Reaction to Home Visits by Teachers

Importance of Teacher's Visit	Teacher's Understanding in Parent's Judgement				Total
	Very poor	Poor	Good	Very good	
Really essential for program	0	2	0	0	2
Would help and probably really necessary	2	2	7	2	13
Would help but not really necessary	4	0	11	1	16
Not necessary	0	2	0	0	2
Total	6	6	18	3	33

χ^2 (9) = 22.7, p < .01

Correspondence Program, felt the visitor could initiate contact between parents in their area by arranging a group meeting. Eleven families felt that it would be useful if the visitor could suggest ways to deal with behaviour problems.

What the parents most clearly wanted from any home visitor was educational advice Some were hopeful of bonuses in other areas but these were clearly subsidiary. If the pre-school teacher from the correspondence school could visit, the needs would probably best be met, provided that the pre-school teacher was also able to advise on primary correspondence work for older children. In fact, any visiting program should be co-ordinated by the two correspondence units – pre-school and primary.

Table 18: Preferred Timing of Home Visit by Teacher

Timing	Number	Percent
Before the program starts	1	3.1
Early in the year	15	46.9
Mid year	13	40.6
Anytime	3	9.4
Total	32	100.0

Table 19: Preferred Tasks for Home Visitor to Undertake

Tasks	Desirable			
	Yes		No	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Advise on Primary school work	18	56.2	14	43.8
Advise on Nutrition	5	15.6	27	84.4
Arrange meetings of Parents	10	31.2	22	68.8
Deal with child's behaviour problems	11	34.3	21	65.7

Program Presentation

The methods of presentation to be employed by parents in presenting the pre-school program to their children allowed a good deal of individual freedom. Specific advice was given to parents in the introduction to the first set of materials. In particular, they were told parents were not expected to attempt all aspects covered in the program books but to choose among the suggestions. Some discussion topics and activities were marked as important by an asterisk and it was suggested they be presented first but the parent was then encouraged to choose among the remaining activities for those of particular interest to the child. During the interview parents were asked to indicate both how they believed the program was to be used and how they actually used it. The pattern of responses to these two questions is shown in Table 20.

There was a strong relationship between parents perceptions of how they were required to use the materials and how they actually did. Indeed more than half of them declared that they exercised choice among the program options as it had been suggested they should. Only eight of the parents reported a discrepancy between what they were doing and what they thought they should have been doing. The fact that six families did believe that they were expected to work through all suggestions is evidence that they failed either to see or to understand the proposed basis of use. Only three of these families had actually been able to work through the program in this detailed way. That point, notwithstanding, the degree of freedom of choice for parents probably needs further emphasis and the parents probably need clear criteria for making the choices. This would ensure that all parents were familiar with the manner in which they were expected to use the program. The point should not be lost, however, that 20 of the 34 parents did understand the program requirement and 18 of them followed them.

A detailed description of the materials provided in the correspondence program is provided by Ashby, McGaw and Perry (1975). Parents received a *Resource Book* with their first set of materials. This book provided many ideas and suggestions for using materials which are readily available in the home. They also received a basic *Equipment Kit* which included materials such as paper, scissors, paint and paste brushes, powder paints, crayons, clay, magnifying glass and magnets.

Table 20: Parents' Actual Use and Perceived Requirements for Use of Program Materials

Actual Method of Use	Perceived Required Use					Total
	do all suggestions	choose among suggestions	use some suggestions to make own program	do what can be fitted in	do those marked important and interesting ones	
do all suggestions	3	1	0	0	0	4
choose among suggestions	2	18	0	2	1	23
use some to make own program	1	1	3	0	0	5
do what can be fitted in	0	0	1	0	0	1
do those marked important and interesting ones	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total	6	20	4	3	1	34

χ^2 (16) = 44.2, p < ·001

In addition to these resources, provided at the beginning of the year, the regular program materials, divided into eight segments, were despatched at 5–6 week intervals. Within each segment there were a *Program Book*, divided into 3–4 topics and containing outlines for suggested discussions, and methods for presenting a variety of play activities; *Story Booklets* (included in five of the eight segments) which focus on the topics and which may be used by the parents to introduce the topics; a *Cassette Tape* containing songs, stories, verse, sounds and suggestions for movement; a *Story Booklet* and language experiences including, for example, picture sequence stories and verse which may be read to the children; *Contact*, a booklet for parents covering topics such as child development and education, and providing an opportunity for the exchange of ideas among parents; and a *Teacher Information Sheet* in the form of a questionnaire to be completed by the parent giving information about the child's response to the segment.

In the interviews the parents were asked to comment on the quality of program materials and where applicable to offer suggestions for their improvement. Their responses in regard to the *Resource Book*, shown in Table 21, reflect a high level of parent satisfaction with 29 considering there to be no need for change and the remaining 4 who responded believing some change to be necessary. All 33 parents indicated that they had referred to the *Resource Book*. Fewer of them had used the book for other more specific purposes, however. The numbers of parents who did use it for obtaining specific suggestions for program presentation or extension are shown in Table 21. Of the 33 parents who responded, 20 used the book for ideas in presenting the program and 18 for ideas in extending the program. Only 10 said they used it for activities when they had completed the program but many of those who didn't would probably not have

"finished" and, therefore, not perceived this sort of need. In response to an open question about other uses for the resource book 27 parents indicated that they used it as a source of group activities for children's play.

Table 21: Parents' Actual Use of *Resource Book* by Perceived Need for Improvement

Use of *Resource Book*		Improvements Considered Necessary	
		No	Yes
as a reference	yes	29	4
	no	0	0
for details of program presentation	yes	18	2
	no	11	2
for new ideas in program presentation	yes	15	3
	no	14	1
for ideas to use when program completed	yes	9	1
	no	20	3

The *Resource Book* was well received and well used by parents. Those parents who suggested improvements did so, not because they were dissatisfied with the book, but because they felt it could be improved. One specific improvement suggested was the inclusion of an index. With an index, those parents claimed they would use the book more often.

The parents' assessments of the *Program Books*, summarized in Table 22, reveal that parental approval of these was virtually as high as that for the *Resource Book*. Only four parents felt that the content of *Program Books* could be improved though several others did suggest changes in both the presentation of the books and the frequency of their despatch. The type of changes suggested by parents are shown in Table 22. Twelve families expressed their satisfaction with the present arrangements and advocated no changes in either the presentation or content of the *Program Books*. Of the 18 families who desired changes, nine requested that the *Program Books* be in a smaller format to enable children to handle them easily. Seventeen of the parents regularly completed the book from one segment well before the arrival of the next segment, and they expressed a preference for the books to come more frequently.

The clear view of the parents about the *Program Books* was one of satisfaction with their content but with a preference for more frequent despatch. In the view of some parents, a change to a smaller format more suitable for the children was also desirable. When asked more specifically about the presentation of the books 12 suggested improvements to the illustrations, proposing the use of real life colour illustrations. These illustrations were sought particularly for those concepts which were outside the experience of the children. One example, given by some parents, was a lighthouse

Table 22: Perceived Needs for Changes in Content, Format, and Frequency of Despatch of *Program Books*

Preferred Format and Frequency of Despatch	Need for Improved Content		Total
	no	yes	
Smaller format/more frequent	8	1	9
Same format/more frequent	8	0	8
Same as at present	12	3	15
Larger format/less frequently	0	1	1
Total	28	5	33

χ^2 (12) = 36.5, $p < .001$

which is presented in the present materials as a sketch of a model which the family could construct. The only other suggestions proposed changes such as the use of hard covers or the inclusion of the story booklets in the program book.

The *Story Booklets* were another aspect of the program which was generally well-received by both parents and children. Twenty-seven of the families commended the booklets and said they wanted no change to them. Several, in fact, commented to the interviewers that they had missed the booklets in those segments which did not contain them. Parents reported that some of the older pre-school children in the program had been attempting to learn some of the simply words in these booklets.

As Table 23 indicates, five families were critical of the booklets, with four actually advocating their omission from the program on the grounds that they were too simple and their content already well-known to their children. With a program catering for children ranging in age, at date of enrolment, from four years to almost six years it is not surprising that the content of some aspects did not suit all children.

Parents offered, on their own behalf, somewhat similar criticisms of *Contact*, the booklet prepared for them. Of the 33 parents who responded, 13 reported that they made no use of it. The reactions of all the parents, summarized in Table 24, revealed that only 13 parents were satisfied with it. The seven parents who offered specific suggestions for its improvement suggested the use of illustrations, the inclusion of ideas for equipment and a general increase in the depth of treatment. Eleven other parents declared their belief that the booklet underestimated them, with four of them actually urging its discontinuation.

In the interview, the parents were invited to comment on aspects of the program with with which they had experienced difficulty and specifically to identify the source of the difficulty. Twenty-three families indicated that they had had difficulty with the presentation of at lease one topic. In eight of these cases, the parent judged the topic to be too difficult to explain whereas, in the remainder, the parents accepted the

Table 23: **Perceived Need for Improvements to *Story Booklets***

Change Proposed	Number of Parents	Percent
No change	27	81.8
No change to content, just combine into single book	1	3.0
Change desired but not specified	1	3.0
Delete because they are too simple	4	12.2
Total	33	100.0

Table 24: Parents' Reactions to *Contact*

Parents' Reactions	Number of Parents	Percent
Good – hints helpful	13	39.4
Unsure of its purpose	2	6.1
Specific improvements needed	7	21.2
Too simple and uninteresting	7	21.2
Suggested it be discontinued	4	12.1
Total	33	100.0

difficulty as inevitable (in one case perceiving it to be the child's problem) or commented that the topic could have been less difficult if better teaching suggestions had been available.

Ten of the parents reported particular difficulty with the concept of the 'extended family'. Five of them expressed the view that the concept was inappropriate for their children. Of the other five, four simply listed it as a difficult concept to teach while the fifth explicitly expressed the view that her problems could have been reduced by a more helpful treatment of the topic in the *Program Book*.

Seven families reported difficulties in dealing with environments or situations their children had never experienced. The general view of these parents was that, with the use of photographs of real-life situations, the concepts could have been communicated adequately.

In the general discussion with parents of topics they found difficult or judged to be inappropriate, several parents raised examples of activities suggested by the program which they judged to be dangerous. In one case, an illustration of a child on a nature

walk showed a child close to water alone and apparently unsupervised. Another illustration, which caused concern to one parent, showed a child playing, again apparently on a high plank fixed to a tree. A further example raised by one parent involved, not the apparent encouragement of unsupervised play or discovery in areas deemed dangerous, but an activity judged to be dangerous in any circumstances. This was the suggestion that children put their heads out the window of a moving car to feel the wind. Other suggested activities such as jumping down the front steps also drew comment. The general view of the parents was that, since they cannot be with their children all the time, some activities which may be suitable in supervised pre-school playgrounds can be potentially dangerous for the children in the correspondence program if they are suggested explicitly to the children through illustrations in the program materials. Teachers could well solicit direct comment from parents on issues such as this as a basis for modifications to the program.

When asked whether there were any other topics which they would have liked in the program, 25 parents commented that there was already an abundance of topics and activities from which to choose. The suggestions of those who proposed additional topics included health and sex education, good manners, differences among animal species, and engines. The examples of mechanical engines and animal studies arose directly from the interests of particular children in the program. Although topics such as these could have been dealt with by the parents on their own initiative, the parents felt the need for some guidance on initial presentation.

The nature of the parents' reactions to these various aspects of the program emphasises the need for adequate communication from parents to teachers about the program and the child's reaction to it. The routine procedure by which parents were required to report to teachers was the completion of a *Teacher Information Sheet* at the end of every segment. To some extent, the teachers were able to obtain information about the child from material the child sent in but the main source of information was the parents and that mostly through the information sheets. These consisted of a series of questions about the child's reaction to the discussion topics and activities suggested in the segment.

The fact that completion and return of these questionnaires was a requirement of parents was made clear in instances in which further program materials were withheld until delayed questionnaires had been received by the teachers. When asked whether they saw completion of the questionnaires as an obligation only six said 'no' and, of these, three explicitly indicated that they did complete them because they believed them to be important. The methods parents used to complete the questionnaires are summarized in Table 25.

Clearly the majority of the parents answered the questionnaires when they had completed all the work for a segment. Several others, however, reported that they had initially done this but found it difficult to remember details for the early parts of the segment. They had since changed their method to the completion of the relevant section of the information sheet after working through each topic in the program segment. Only six families did complete the questionnaire in this way. Most reported filling it in 'just before it had to be sent back'. One parent actually worked through the questionnaire with the child, using the questionnaire as a guide to the more important features of the segment.

Parents were asked about their views of the value of the information they provided to the teachers through the information sheets. Their responses to an unstructured question on this issue have been categorized in Table 26. The largest group, 15, believed that their responses would help the teachers but two felt that there were

instances in which their answers to the questions asked would actually have misled the teachers. The other three who felt it was a useful exercise believed it to be so not because of its value for the teacher but because of its value for the parent either by revealing emphases to them or facilitating review. Ten of the parents doubted the value of the questionnaires, four because it was unclear to them what was wanted, two because they found it difficult to remember the detail when they came to complete the questionnaire, one because the questions seemed irrelevant and the remaining three for no declared reason though they did, like many others, complain about the time required for the task.

Table 25: Parents' Methods of Completion of *Teacher Information Sheets*

Method of Completion	Number of Parents	Percent
as worked through	1	3.0
at end of topic	6	18.2
at end of segment	23	69.7
none completed	3	9.1
Total	33	100.0

Although 18 parents saw values in the *Teacher Information Sheets*, as shown in Table 26, only 12 believed that all the questions asked were necessary, as shown in Table 27. The remaining 21 felt that at least some questions were unnecessary, either because they perceived redundancy between questionnaires or because they simply believed the questionnaires to be too long.

Only 15 of the parents believed they had any evidence that the teachers had used the information provided through the questionnaires and, even among this group, more than half believed that unnecessary questions were asked. Of course, it can be argued that teachers can require information for purposes and use it in ways not obvious to parents and that the wisdom of asking certain questions should not be gauged from the judgements of the respondents but the effort and care of the respondents will be influenced by their judgements. Certainly some parents reported a relatively perfunctory approach to answering the questions. If the teachers want the questions to be answered carefully and accurately they need to give serious attention to the reduction of the number of questions asked, to a clarification of the usefulness of the questions and answers and to a demonstration of the uses to which the responses are put.

An analysis of the type and substance of the actual communications between teachers and parents during the first 33 weeks of the 1975 school year is reported in McGaw, Ashby and Perry (1975). This analysis highlighted the extent to which parents provide information which was both unsolicited and unused by the teachers. Thus, even though the amount of correspondence between parents and teachers was far from substantial much of what there was served no useful purpose. The *Teachers Information Sheets*, must not only be made to work, the parents must see them work!

Table 26: Parents' Views of Value of *Teacher Information Sheets*

Reaction to Completing *Teacher Information Sheets*	Number of Parents	Percent
Responses should help teacher	15	45.4
Responses may mislead teacher	2	6.1
Responding helps parent review	1	3.0
Questions reveal emphases	2	6.1
Unsure – not clear what is wanted	4	12.1
Unsure – difficult to remember detail	2	6.1
Unsure – time consuming task	3	9.1
Unsure – questions seem irrelevant	1	3.0
None completed	3	9.1
Total	33	100.0

Table 27: Parents' Views of Necessity for Questions in *Teacher Information Sheets* by Evidence of Teacher Use of Responses

Value of Questions in *Teacher Information Sheets*	Evidence of Teacher Use of Information		
	None Completed	No Evidence of Use	Evidence of Use
all necessary	0	6	6
some unnecessary – too repetitive	0	3	0
some unnecessary – unspecified	1	6	9
some unnecessary – too extensive	2	1	0
Total	3	16	15

Child--Teacher Relationship

In a correspondence program there are obvious limitations on the methods available to teachers to build up a meaningful relationship with the children. They are unable to observe the children in play or to share experiences with them. The teachers can correspond with children through letter and cassette tape, but must depend on the parents to read the letters to the children. Tapes were chosen as the main vehicle for communication from teachers to children and this is reflected in the data on frequency and mode of communication reported by McGaw, Ashby and Perry (1975).

In addition to personal tapes, most teachers sent a personal photograph to the children for whom they were responsible and a number also forwarded materials such as sea shells and milk bottle tops which were unavailable to some of the children. The children responded by returning taped messages, providing a photograph of themselves and forwarding art work such as paintings and pastings.

Parents reported that 26 of the children had forwarded art work to their teachers. The response rate and the nature of the responses, as reported by the parents are shown in Table 28. Only nine of the children received replies from the teachers within three weeks and, probably more importantly, only five of them received replies which contained more than a routine comment of praise. Three of those who had received no reply had been waiting for more than six weeks.

Table 28: Nature and Rate of Teachers' Responses to Children's Art Samples

Number of weeks since work forwarded	Teacher Response			Total
	No Reply	Routine Praise	Praise and Extension	
1	4	0	0	4
2	1	4	2	7
3	1	3	0	4
4	0	2	1	3
5	0	2	2	4
6	0	1	0	1
7–8	2	0	0	2
9–12	1	0	0	1
Total	9	12	5	26

The response rate over the full period of the first 33 weeks, shown in McGaw, Ashby and Perry (1975), continued this pattern of excessively delayed replies. It is not clear why the teachers were so unresponsive but it clearly affected the children. Almost one third of them, according to their parents, were unable to remember the work to which the teacher referred when the teacher's reply was received. When 27 of the children themselves were interviewed and asked about what they did for their teacher two declared that they did pre-school work, eleven referred to activities undertaken, ten

others expanded on this explanation by adding that they forwarded completed materials to the correspondence teacher, and four provided no relevant response. When asked specifically about what happened when they did things for the teacher, six reported that they were praised and thanked by the teacher, two said the teacher sent more material, one that his mother disapproved of the work he had done, and five rather despondently reported that the teacher had not written or said anything about it. The remaining thirteen children provided no relevant response.

Despite the evidence of delayed and, in some cases, absent replies from teachers to children, parents of 28 of the 34 reported that their children attributed the pre-school program to the teacher. Of course, even in the absence of personal communications the children did receive a new segment of the program regularly and probably attributed this to their teachers even though the teachers' actual role was to supplement this common and routine provision. Two parents claimed that their children would have been unaware of a program as such and two other parents thought their children believed them responsible. For the other two children, the parents of one reported that he believed the mailman was responsible for the program and the other a governess. (Governesses are employed on some country properties to supervise the correspondence work of primary school children. Although staff in the Pre-School Correspondence Program preferred the parents themselves to take responsibility for the children's programs there was obviously one child whose program was the responsibility of a governess.)

The 28 children who regarded the pre-school correspondence teacher as responsible for this program were reported by their parents to have made reference to the teacher in a number of situations. Eleven of them talked about the teacher while receiving and using the materials while six others did so more specifically in relation to their teacher's photograph. For six others, the opportunity to refer to their teacher in the company of adults or older children provided a sense of importance. Of the remaining five children, two made reference to their teachers on important occasions, two at any time and one when being chastised by parents.

Although parents reported that 28 of the children made reference to their teachers, when the children themselves were interviewed in their own home only 19 of them could give their teacher's name. A child was asked this question only after the interviewer had been with the family long enough to have established some rapport with him. In seven cases the child was either still too shy to answer or unable to understand the question. The responses of the 27 who answered are summarized in Table 29 which shows that, apart from the 19 who correctly named their teachers, two named local school teachers and six were unable to recall their teacher's name or were unaware of having one. Some parents commented that they did not emphasize the fact that there was a teacher and, in fact, several could not themselves remember the relevant teacher's name.

Brisbane was known to be the home of the teacher by only 13 of the children but even these children often did not understand how far away this was and some wondered why their teacher did not come to visit them. Nine of the children thought the teacher lived in the local town with the teachers of their older siblings or friends. Two were actually confused by the presence of the visitor and could not be convinced that she was not actually the teacher.

The evidence that some children had difficulty in recognizing the existence of a correspondence teacher and that others had difficulty in understanding much about what the teacher did or where she lived serves to highlight the problems for correspondence teachers trying to establish a relationship with the child.

Table 29: **Persons Named by Children as Teacher**

Answer	Number	Percent
Correct name of pre-school teacher	19	70.4
Name of a local teacher	2	7.4
Name not known	6	22.2
Total	27	100.0

The Child in the Program

The children, as consumers of the Pre-School Correspondence Program, provide the best source of information about the popularity of the program. Accordingly parents were asked to assess the children's reactions to each aspect of the program and to rank the five main aspects of the program from the most liked to least liked. The results are shown in Table 30. The pre-recorded tapes were regarded by half the children as the most popular aspect of the program while a further third felt the general activities were the most enjoyable. The story booklets and activities related to discussion topics were rated the third and fourth most popular aspects respectively while the least popular aspect of the program was judged by 53 per cent of the children to be the suggested discussion topics.

Table 30: **Popularity of Aspects of Program with Children**

Aspect of Program	Number of Children Assigning Rank*					Total
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	
Story Booklets	4	7	8	5	7	31
Suggested Discussion Topics	0	0	4	11	16	31
Activities related to Discussions	1	5	6	13	4	29
General Activities	10	11	6	1	1	29
Pre-recorded Tapes	15	8	5	3	2	33
Total	30	31	29	33	30	

* instances of equal ratings for two or more aspects have been excluded and this accounts for the unequal totals

The popularity of the pre-recorded tapes was confirmed by the way children reacted to them. Of the 34 children, 74 per cent did more than just listen to the tapes. These 25 children joined in the movements suggested and replied to the questions on tape, as shown in Table 31, and 22 of them also sang the songs and said the rhymes they were familiar with.

Table 31: Children's Reactions to Pre-recorded Tapes

Reaction	Yes	No
Passive listening	9	25
Singing	22	12
Moving	25	9
Saying Rhymes	22	12
Answering Questions	25	9

Although most children accepted the administrative requirement that the tapes be returned, eight children did want to keep them. Parents, in fact, mentioned several instances of children requesting a favourite song or story on a tape which had already been returned. Some parents had obviously overcome this problem by taping a copy before returning the original.

The method of use suggested for the pre-recorded tapes was for children to listen to 10 or 15 minute sections of the tape at each listening session. From the parent interviews, however, it was clear that 13 children listened to the whole tape at each session while a further 11 played at least a whole side at a time. There were three children who did not like the tapes and who would not listen for more than five minutes. The majority of children, however, played each tape more than five times, much to the despair of some of the parents. Although there was a tendency for the later tapes to be played less often by children, the third tape had still been played more than five times by half the children at the time of the interview.

In parents' eyes, the second most popular aspect of the program for the children was the general activities. Several of these general activities suggested in the program, such as outdoor play, make believe, drawing, waterplay, sandplay and play with blocks were undertaken every one or two days by more than 50 per cent of the children. The frequency of involvement with each of the general activities is shown in Table 32.

These most popular activities were those of a general nature, probably well known to children regardless of their involvement in the Pre-School Correspondence Program. Those activities played least frequently, such as puppet play, finger painting, dough play and threading, however, were more specifically associated with activities suggested by the program. A further consideration with these activities is that they all required the parent to be actively involved in the preparation of relevant materials. Children were only likely to have engaged in these activities as frequently as their parents participated by preparing the materials.

The third most popular aspect of the program, according to the parents' reports of the children's judgements, were the *Story Booklets*. Children s familiarity with the content of these booklets and their ease in understanding those with new material are shown in

Table 33. The degree of difficulty of the material for the children was found to be unrelated to the children's age within the age range in the sample.

Table 32: Frequency of Children's Involvement in General Activities

Activity	Frequency				
	Daily	Twice/Wk	Weekly	Less Than Wkly	Never
Painting	5	13	11	3	2
Finger painting	0	1	2	22	9
Play with Dough	4	3	5	14	8
Water play	16	5	4	7	2
Sand play	16	4	5	7	2
Play with blocks	9	9	7	6	3
Collage	1	3	12	14	4
Drawing	14	10	3	6	1
Pasting	7	8	12	6	1
Carpentry	1	10	1	9	13
Threading	2	3	7	14	8
Puppets	0	4	2	16	12
Make believe	21	4	3	3	3
Outdoor play	33	0	0	0	1

Table 33: Difficulty of Content of Story Booklets

Story Booklet	Difficulty of Content				Booklet Not Used
	Already Known	Easy	Part Easy/ Part Difficult	Difficult	
Me	21	11	1	0	1
Names	13	17	3	0	1
See How I Move	7	22	3	1	1
Now I Am	7	18	8	0	1
My Family	7	14	8	3	2
The House Where I Live	8	18	4	2	2
My Day	8	19	4	1	2
All Around You	5	21	5	0	3
I Like People	4	21	5	0	4
Where You Live	5	18	5	1	5

There were some clear differences among the booklets. The content of the first booklet, *Me*, was known by 61 per cent of the children prior to its presentation and that for the second, *Names*, by 38 per cent of them. None of the other booklets was judged to have been redundant in this way for more than eight children. This pattern accords with the parents' views of the *Story Booklets*, shown in Table 23. Most parents were happy with the booklets as they were, and the fact that the first two covered little that was new for the children was probably a strength not a weakness.

Over 60 per cent of the children were able to understand readily the content of all the booklets. Those which were reported to cause the most difficulty were *My Family* and *The House Where I Live*. Parents' reports of difficulty with the concept of an extended family have already been referred to and this reported difficulty for 11 children with the related story suggests a need for re-examination of the topic.

Apart from the first two booklets, in which a considerable number of children found no new material, the degree of novelty and level of difficulty did not change systematically through the succession of subsequent booklets. The level of children's interest, however, did drop systematically as shown in Table 34. Interest in the booklets seemed to wane later in the series with the last three booklets prior to the interviews being of least interest to the children. Several parents commented on the format and style of the booklets. No colour was used except for the covers but some parents felt that the use of multi-colour drawings would have made the booklets more appealing to the pre-school children.

Table 34: Level of Children's Interest in Story Booklets

Story Booklet	Level of Children's Interest			Booklet Not Used
	Extremely Interesting	Reasonably Interesting	Not Interesting	
Me	12	17	5	0
Names	9	20	5	0
See How I Move	10	19	4	1
Now I Am	6	23	4	1
My Family	11	17	4	2
The House Where I Live	11	17	4	2
My Day	7	17	8	2
All Around You	4	20	7	3
I Like People	5	16	10	3
Whre You Live	6	17	7	4

The two aspects of the program judged to be least popular with the children were the suggested discussion topics and activities specifically related to them. These, of course, were the components most demanding on parents since there was no materials available which uniquely and completely dealt with the issues. The children enjoyed most what the parents could, in fact, organize most readily. This does not mean, of course, that the discussions were either actively disliked or ineffective. It means only that, in comparative terms, other aspects of the program were more popular with the children. The strategies parents used in the actual program presentation and, in particular, in the conduct of discussions will be the subject of a subsequent evaluation report in this series. Parents' judgements about the program content, particularly that contained in the *Resource Book* and the *Program Books*, were collected during the interviews only to the extent shown in Tables 21 and 22.

In regard to other resources available to the families, the general reaction to the library books provided was favourable. The parents' reports of their children's reactions, shown in Table 35, suggest that most books received were of interest to the children. Twenty-eight of the children found most of the books they received interesting and the five others who had received books enjoyed at least some of them. There were six parents who made some criticism of the selection of books. Five of the parents felt only a few books were interesting for their child. One book which caused some concern presented snakes as friendly animals capable of talking and playing. Parents who lived in areas where there were dangerous snakes were upset by this book since they preferred to emphasize the dangers of snakes with their children.

Table 35: Level of Children's Interests in Library Books

Children's Reaction	Number	Percent
Finds Most Books Interesting	28	82.4
Finds Some Books Interesting	5	14.7
Has not had any Books	1	2.9

The popularity of the library facility was emphasized by the fact that 11 of the 28 parents who praised the library actually requested that more books be sent for their children. In the case of one child, the parent judged that the library service was the only part of the program necessary and she sought to use it alone. In this case, the Pre-School Correspondence staff withheld the books because of the non-participation in other areas of the program.

The major resource provided for parents and children apart from the program suggestions and materials, was the *Equipment Kit*. One family did not receive the equipment kit due to an administrative error but the pattern of use of the items in the kit by the other 33 children is shown in Table 36. Children made good use of most materials included in this kit. Some of the items, such as paper, scissors, paste and crayons were used by over 80 per cent of the children at any time they desired. It was more common for items such as the magnets, magnifying glass and clay to be used only with the program. In fact, the clay was not used very often because of parents' lack of knowledge about its preparation and use. Fourteen families had never used the clay and commented on the need for instructions to accompany the equipment kit.

Table 36: Frequency of Children's Use of Items in Equipment Kit

Item	Usage		
	With Program & Other Activities	With Program Only	Never Used
Paper	30	3	0
Coloured Cardboard	15	14	4
Scissors	28	4	1
Paste	28	5	0
Clay	7	12	14
Paint	24	7	2
Crayons	28	3	2
Magnets	21	11	1
Magnifying Glass	19	13	1
Glue	22	8	3
Paint Brushes	24	8	1
Paste Brushes	23	8	2

The need for sufficient instructions to accompany the equipment kit is highlighted by the fact that 23 parents had difficulty with clay, paint, dough or the salt ceramic in the equipment kit. All these materials required preparation by parents and the parents specifically indicated the need for better instructions on their use.

Some activities suggested in the program required for their presentation materials not provided in the kit. Items, such as table tennis balls and egg cartons, which might be readily available in city homes, could not always be found in some of the isolated homes. Despite this lack of some relatively trivial items, the overall opinion of the kit was very favourable. Some parents actually remarked on their surprise at its arrival.

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

All of the children enrolled in the Pre-School Correspondence Program were sufficiently isolated geographically for them to receive their primary education either by correspondence or at a one-teacher school. Despite this geographical isolation few of them appeared to lack regular social contact with other children. Geographical isolation obviously cannot be equated with social isolation. Ten of the children in the sample actually attended pre-school centres and thus received regular group pre-school experiences as well as the Pre-School Correspondence Program. All of these children lived in areas in which it was not feasible, at that stage, to have established State pre-school facilities and, although there may have been other groups with which they could affiliate, access to State pre-school provisions was assured through the correspondence program.

The parents of the ten children who were attending pre-school groups were asked to comment on the relationship between the Pre-School Correspondence Program and the activities of the pre-school centre. Four families believed the two programs were very different with more being offered for children in the Pre-School Correspondence Program. The same number agreed that the programs differed but felt the pre-school centre offered more through greater opportunities for play with other children and the use of a greater range of equipment and materials. Parents of the other two children reported a great deal of similarity between the two programs with even the same stories being told.

Four of the other children in the sample attended regular play group sessions in addition to their involvement in the correspondence program. To provide for this play group experience their parents organized regular meetings with other families. The frequency with which all children in the sample met with other children their own age is shown in Table 37. More than 61 per cent of them did so at least weekly. Eight of these children actually saw others their own age daily. Five of the children were unable to meet others their own age at least monthly but only two of these did not see other children of any age at least once per month. The one child whose parents reported that he never saw other children of the same age did see friends of other ages weekly.

Table 37: Frequency of Children's Contact with Others of Own Age

Frequency	Number	Percent
Daily	8	23.5
Twice/Week	3	8.8
Weekly	10	29.4
Fortnightly	4	11.8
Monthly	4	11.8
Less Than Once Month	4	11.8
Never	1	2.9
Total	34	100.0

Most of the areas visited for the interviews with the families could be called 'isolated' by urban dwellers but the residents made special efforts to meet regularly with other adults and children. Some travelled 40 km each week to collect mail from neighbours. Others travelled 80 km every two weeks or so for film evenings or picnics where family members of all ages could meet with others.

SOCIAL CONTACTS OF PARENTS

The social contacts organized by adults in the isolated areas in which the children in the program lived provided the basis for the children's interactions. For some children this involved the formal organization of play groups, for others simply participation in a general mixing of the families. One of the projected developments of the Pre-School Correspondence Program, which was initiated on a limited basis in 1975, is the establishment of local

meetings of parents and children involved in the program under the title of SPAN groups. During the interviews parents were asked about such meetings to determine the benefits they might expect from them and the bases on which they might become involved.

Among the 34 families, 22 saw benefits for the children in the play and social interaction with the other children and 21 saw benefits for the parents, 15 through the opportunity to share ideas specifically about the correspondence program, 2 through the opportunity to share more general ideas about children's development and 4 through opportunities to discuss specific children's behaviour problems. The 12 families who did not express a view refrained because of their declared inability to attend any such meetings.

From these figures it would appear that almost two-thirds of the families would be interested in meeting with other families enrolled in the Pre-School Correspondence Program. However, when they were asked explicitly whether they would join such a group, 23 of them offered reasons for not wanting to. Their reasons are summarized in Table 38. Of the 23 families who could not attend, 44 per cent were already meeting in groups. Others were unable to attend because of prior commitments, practical limitations or their disapproval of organized meetings.

Table 38: Parents' Reasons for Not Joining with a Projected Group of Families in Program

Reasons	Number	Percent
Not isolated	1	4.4
Already meet socially	4	17.4
Already organised discussion and play group	6	26.1
Too many other commitments	3	13.0
Too isolated	7	30.4
No transport	2	8.7
Total	23	100.0

The eleven families who indicated a willingness to attend meetings of parents were asked how far they would be willing to travel for such meetings. Two families declared a willingness to travel 101–200 km, four families 41–100 km, two families 21–40 km and the other three less than 21 km. The distances they proposed, however, would have been related to their reasonable expectations of where meetings would be held. So the clear message was that those parents willing to be involved were prepared to travel considerable distances.

Only two of these 11 families wanted the meetings held more frequently than once a month, so there was no demand for a high level of activity of this type. Although 23 families declared that they could see benefits from meetings such as the proposed SPAN groups, both for their children and themselves, only 11 families would actually be willing to join such a group and then only once a month or less.

In the projected developments of the SPAN groups it is envisaged that for each prospective group parent leadership will be developed. Clearly one of the tasks for any parent leader would be to convince the parents that there were benefits likely to accrue from involvement beyond those to be gained from less formal social functions. The parents' responses in the interviews did not so much reveal a lack of faith in the value of meetings of parents and children but a belief that they had the benefits already except, of course, for those who judged themselves too remote to benefit from any arrangement.

PARENTS' GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM

Degree of Individualization

During the interview parents were asked whether they believed the correspondence teachers could effectively develop an individual program for their children. Of the 18 who were asked this question, 14 believed the teachers could but the remaining four felt that the responsibility for individualized modifications to the program lay with the parents. However, only four parents believed that they had seen any evidence of teachers individualizing the program. At the time of interview, between seven and eight months after the program began, eight parents claimed to have received no reply from teachers and so were unable to judge whether individualization was occurring.

Developments in Children

From the parents' point of view the distinction between the program materials, produced by the development team, and the unique variations and extensions proposed by the members of the teaching team would have been somewhat artificial. Although the distinction was not drawn as such in the interview, it was implicit in some of the questioning such as that about individualization. When the parents were asked, in general, to assess the influence of the program on their children's development, however, no such distinction was sought. The parents were asked whether the program, as a whole, had affected the children's capacities to listen, to express themselves and to concentrate. Their judgements are summarized in Table 39.

Table 39: Source of Children's Developments Observed by Parents

Source of Improvement	Listening	Self Expression	Concentration
No effect evident	14	21	20
Improvement due to maturation	2	1	2
Improvement due to program	18	12	12
Total	34	34	34

The parents of 18 children believed that their children's listening skills had improved as a consequence of the program. Seven of the parents cited increased attentiveness during the program as evidence, four increased attentiveness in other situations, such as watching T.V., and one greater reflectiveness of the child after listening to something.

Twelve parents believed improvements in their children's self expression could be attributed to the program. Five of these took, as evidence of the improvement, increased vocabulary and five an increased capacity to provide detailed descriptions. One parent referred to a general improvement in self confidence as evidence and another to an improvement in the child's non-verbal communication as a result of improved verbal communication.

Twelve parents also believed improvements in their children's capacity to concentrate could be attributed to the program. Two took as evidence increased reflectiveness before commencing an activity, three increased effort in program activities, two greater ease in completing program activities and five increased time devoted to non-physical activities.

General comments on the effects of the program were offered by 26 families, 10 of them referring to a reduction in the children's level of boredom because of the availability of the program activities. The others referred to particular developments in their children such as improved manipulative skills, improved general knowledge and increased feeling of self importance.

Effect on Parent-Child Relationship

The parents' judgements of the effects of the program on the relationship between mother and child are summarized in Table 40. A major effect of the program for 26 parents and their children was that they spent more time together and, in only one case where the work to be done became a source of friction between mother and child, was the effect negative. Nine parents commented explicitly on the gains involved in the more intensive interactions with their children. In the case of one child where the responsibility for the program was taken by a governess, the mother actually spent less time with the child than she otherwise would have, which is one of the reasons the correspondence staff encouraged parents to take the responsibility themselves. The remaining seven parents believed that their relationships with their children were not altered by their involvement with the program.

Table 40: Effect of Program on Parent-Child Relationship

Effect	Number	Percent
None	7	20.6
Less time together – child with governess	1	2.9
More time together – no further comment	16	47.1
More time together – with positive result	9	26.5
More time together – with negative result	1	2.9
Total	34	100.0

Overall Reaction of Parents to Program

In their general estimation of the program, 84 per cent of the parents expressed a positive opinion. For 40 per cent of the parents this approval was unqualified, for 16 per cent it was approval for a good first attempt, for 21 per cent it was specifically an approval of the program as a preparation for primary school, and for the remaining 7 per cent it was an approval specifically in response to a valued feature of the program such as the library resources.

Among the 16 per cent whose overall reaction to the program was negative were those whose dissatisfaction lay in the infrequent arrival of program materials (6 per cent) and those who had failed to receive from teachers replies to correspondence from themselves or the children (10 per cent).

SUMMARY

The Pre-School Correspondence Program is the product of many people. The organizational arrangement of the various groups responsible is discussed in Ashby, McGaw and Perry (1975). Essentially, the teaching staff was divided into developmental, media, library and resource and illustrating teams for the purpose of developing materials and selecting resources, but all staff took responsibility for about 32 children enrolled in the program.

Each teacher, therefore, had a dual role, with a teaching component and a development component. In her developmental role the teacher may have been involved in the production of some of the resources discussed in this report, or the selection of supplementary library resources. In her teaching role, the teacher's responsibility was to supplement and vary the program according to the development and needs of the particular child. The only source of information available to the teachers on which to base these unique variations to the program was, of course, provided by the parents and to some extent the children themselves in work they sent in.

The strongest evidence of parent dissatisfaction obtained in the interviews came in relation to the teaching role of the correspondence staff. Many parents were unhappy, on the one hand, with the infrequency of communication from the teachers and, on the other, with the amount of information the teachers required from them. There was a general view that much of this information the parents did provide was not used, a view reinforced by the fact that only four parents claimed to have seen any evidence of individualization.

The teaching role was, in many respects, much more difficult than the development role. Deriving, by correspondence, an adequate data base from which to provide individual treatment is no easy task. There is a need for more careful consideration of the type of information required from parents to ensure that the information needed is actually obtained, and that the information obtained is actually used.

The survey of parent reactions to the program did reveal a warm approval of the program materials provided. Whether parents can provide an adequate assessment of an educational program of this type is not at issue here. The perspectives of professionals on the program are being gathered and will be reported subsequently, but it is important to note that the parents overwhelmingly approved the materials provided.

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